

## Yousry Nasrallah

THE PURSUIT OF AUTONOMY IN THE ARAB  
AND EUROPEAN FILM MARKETS  
(EGYPT)

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Yousry Nasrallah at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival 2012.

This chapter surveys the career of the Egyptian filmmaker Yousry Nasrallah (born 1952).<sup>1</sup> Through an analysis of the eight feature-length films he directed between 1988 and 2012, it considers the relationships between his social background and biography, his pursuit of autonomy from the economic interests of mainstream film production, and the ways his films challenge social norms.

Autonomy can be understood in terms of the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu, where it has a specific meaning. For Bourdieu, the production of cultural goods often takes place in “fields.” The social world of cinema is a field in this sense, like the worlds of literature, journalism, and academic disciplines.<sup>2</sup> A field is an arena of conflict, in which those who make cultural goods (directors, actors, critics, etc.) compete to attain dominant positions. Each field has its norms, its rules for competition, its criteria for evaluating participants. There are two main types of production in fields. The short production cycle involves responding to the present demands of the market outside the field; if vampire films are popular now, a vampire film stands a chance of making an immediate profit. This strategy has low autonomy from economic forces outside the field. In contrast, the long production cycle involves producing, partly or entirely, for an audience consisting of one’s peers in the field. Since one’s peers are also one’s competitors, their judgment carries a certain symbolic weight, and their

approval can confer prestige and legitimacy on films and filmmakers, *consecrating* them as part of the canon of art cinema.

Art cinema is made, at least to some extent, to satisfy the aesthetic criteria established by previous consecrated filmmakers. It thus has particular stylistic characteristics that distinguish it from mass-market cinema. Mass-market cinema tends to have aspects of what Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1988) call the classical Hollywood style: reliable, omniscient narration, a plot driven by the characters' psychology and individual choices, techniques aimed at drawing the audience's attention away from the fact that they are watching a film, and a narrative structure based on the selective withholding of information, enabling the audience to progressively narrow down a set of hypotheses about the future.<sup>3</sup> Art cinema is recognizable by its differences from this norm; for example, it can have unreliable narration, its story can be driven by impersonal social forces beyond the characters' control, it can present a plethora of uncertainties that the audience can never resolve, and its actors can talk to the camera about their roles. An art film presumes an audience that possesses a particular kind of cultural competence, consisting of familiarity with the history and conventions of art cinema, and often of the visual arts in general. This competence is a type of what Bourdieu calls "cultural capital"; it is an aspect of social inequality, since it is more concentrated in some social classes than in others. Indeed, its exclusiveness is part of what makes it valuable. Thus art cinema, being relatively less marketable, has some autonomy from the demands of the market. This, in turn, gives it a degree of freedom to challenge social norms, which is harder to do in mass-market cinema, since most people will not pay to have their beliefs questioned. All of Yousry Nasrallah's films have some of these characteristics of art cinema.

However, since film is an expensive medium (compared to literature, for example, in which a writer can produce a novel for the cost of survival plus pen and paper), autonomy in cinema is always relative at best, and must rely on a variety of strategies in order to exist. In Europe, one strategy has been state subsidies. France has the most comprehensive system in Europe for the public funding of cinema (Jäckel 2003, 49), having made major investments in the film industry since the 1980s (Jäckel 1999, 178). This system relies partly on the use of television. The Franco-German public television channel Arte,<sup>4</sup> launched in 1992, is a prestigious producer of autonomous cinema (Jäckel 2003, 55–57; Emanuel 1999, 85), whose audience is "endowed with cultural capital" (Jäckel 1999, 184). French film policy not only supports French filmmakers; it has also benefited many filmmakers from elsewhere "who, for various reasons,

have found it difficult to make films in their own country" (Jäckel 1996, 85). Nasrallah has relied on French state funding since his first film, and nearly all his films were co-produced by Arte. We will consider his use of this strategy below.

#### THE FORMATION OF AN AUTONOMOUS DISPOSITION

Nasrallah wanted to make films from adolescence, but when he graduated from high school, he could not enroll in the Film Institute (Ma'had al-Sinema), because applicants were then required to have a bachelor's degree.<sup>5</sup> So he enrolled in the economics and political science program at Cairo University. There he became involved in the emerging student protest movement, and participated in pro-democracy demonstrations in 1972. During this period, he joined the Egyptian Communist Workers Party,<sup>6</sup> which in his view had the best analysis of the policies of the military regime that had taken power in 1952; it argued that president Gamal Abdel Nasser's claim to have established socialism was "simply a cover for the militarization of the state."

While he was still at the university, the Film Institute changed its admission policy; he enrolled, but found it "boring and reactionary." In 1978, after finishing his university education, he went to Beirut, hoping to make a film on young Palestinians in Lebanon and Jordan, but could not obtain funding. Instead, he stayed in Beirut for four years, working as a film critic for the Lebanese leftist newspaper *Al-Safir*. Meanwhile, he withdrew from all political parties and organizations. Egyptian communist groups had already begun to disintegrate under state pressure before he left Egypt. In any case, he felt that "if you want to make art, you shouldn't do it within a centralized, dogmatic party." Though he liked communists' ideas, he was uncomfortable with their organizational structures, especially once he learned about the oppressive character of Soviet communism, an issue Egyptian communists avoided discussing. Nevertheless, he has remained strongly influenced by leftist ideas, which are reflected in his films, as we will see.

Being alone in Lebanon during the civil war made him focus on survival and self-reliance, and freed him from certain social constraints that he experienced in Egypt. As he put it: "There was something very decisive in the experience in Beirut. . . . I was living in the way that best accorded with my nature . . . far from all the institutional structures in Egypt, structures of family, sect, or party. . . . I was alone. . . . I think this was the kind of moment that shapes a person as an artist."

## SUMMER THEFTS

In Beirut he met the Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine, who invited him to return to Egypt to work as an assistant on his film *Adieu Bonaparte* (1985), a French-Egyptian co-production. After this experience, he made his first film, *Summer Thefts* (*Vols d'été / Sariqat Sayfiya*, 1988). The film is largely autobiographical. Born in the Cairo suburb of Giza and raised in the affluent neighborhood of Zamalek in central Cairo, Nasrallah grew up in a Christian landowning family that was terrified of Nasser and lost a great deal as a result of his policies. As a child, he spent summer vacations on his family's farm in the village of Akyad in the Nile Delta. The film begins in July 1961. Yasser, a young boy from a wealthy landowning family, is on his family's farm for summer vacation when president Nasser announces a set of "socialist" reforms. Most of the family is furious. Yasser's aunt Mona considers getting a divorce and marrying an opportunist who is close to the regime, in the hope of holding onto more of her land.

Yasser makes friends with a peasant boy, Leil, but his mother, Reema, forbids him to associate with peasants ("those scum"). Hence when his Nasserist cousin Dahlia arrives after a long absence, he tells her not to greet her servant Khadra with a kiss, "because she's a peasant." Yet he longs to swim in the canal "like the peasants." He is forbidden to do so, ostensibly for fear he will catch bilharzia, a disease that affects the urinary tract. The implied sexual attraction between Yasser and Leil is prohibited by both sexual and class taboos. The two boys swim in the canal together anyway, and he does catch bilharzia.

And Yasser begins to embrace socialism. When his parents get divorced, he fears he will have to go live with his father because Reema will be unable to support him and his sister, so he imitates Robin Hood, stealing valuables from rich people's houses, with Leil's help. The theft is discovered and Leil is arrested. The film then skips to 1982. Yasser has spent several years in Beirut, and returns to find the house demolished. Reema has sold her land because there are no longer any peasants to farm it; Mona has married her opportunist and kept her land for purely sentimental reasons. No longer able to live by farming, Leil is about to emigrate to Iraq. Yasser tells him that he was glad to have caught bilharzia by swimming in the canal. He adds, "I've never loved anyone as much as I loved you," and they swim in the canal again.

Nasrallah's interest in taboos, which runs through all his films, follows from the deeper question of how to cope with a frightening world. He explained:

If you look at all my films from that point of view, you'll find that they're all about . . . going somewhere that people try to frighten you away from. They're all films about characters . . . who don't accept being victims. There's a sort of Arab broken record that says, America is beating us up, Israel is occupying us, our governments oppress us, Mommy and Daddy are horrible and made me into a criminal. This gives our cinema something, and fosters something in us, that's opposed to modernity. To me, modernity means that yes, the world is frightening, but you're not afraid, you can cope with it. . . . What made me aware of this is the four years I spent in Beirut.

Nasrallah's view of Nasser's "socialism" was influenced by a book (Amir 1958) that critiqued Nasser's land reforms from a communist perspective: land was redistributed to peasants, but they were only allowed to plant certain crops, such as cotton or rice, which were grown for export and whose only buyer was the state, which bought them at low prices in order to compete in global markets. Meanwhile, affluent landowners still had sizeable estates, and were free to plant orchards, whose fruit could be sold at higher prices. In reality, "the poor were made to carry the burdens of development." State agricultural policies in the 1970s made survival more difficult for peasants, and by the end of the decade, many were emigrating to become manual laborers in Arab oil-producing countries.

*Summer Thefts* was not an easy film to produce. In the 1980s, Nasrallah realized that the Saudi video market had become the major source of funding for Egyptian cinema. Saudi consumers had started to buy large quantities of videocassettes, and the price of a videocassette was high. Moreover, advertisements were not permitted on Saudi television, but they could be seen on videocassettes, and this produced considerable revenue for distributors. However, with this new market came new restrictions: censorship was stricter than in Egypt, and Saudi distributors valued a film mainly according to the popularity of its stars. Stars place huge burdens on a film's budget, as we will see below, and the need to pay for them can restrict a filmmaker's autonomy. Nasrallah tried to cast Yousra, a major star, but she declined; the film's controversial political stance, and his status as an unknown, made working with him a risky proposition for a star. A wealthy cousin contributed US \$50,000 to finance the film, and Youssef Chahine suggested that with that sum, he could make the film with amateur actors: "You'll be able to do what you want." Further assistance came in the form

of a prize for the screenplay from the French Cultural Center in Cairo (Salih 1988), which covered the cost of film stock and processing using the recently invented, low-cost Super 16 format.

In short, Nasrallah's participation in the 1972 student movement, followed by his experience of self-reliance and distance from social constraints in Beirut, helped shape a disposition toward autonomy. He was able to follow this disposition when making *Summer Thefts* thanks to his family's economic capital, the technical advance of Super 16, and state funding from Europe. This last factor would be decisive in his subsequent career. The initial results were encouraging: the film was shown at Cannes and distributed in France. Samir Farid (1988) described its critique of Nasserism as one-sided, but it otherwise received enthusiastic reviews in the Egyptian and French press,<sup>7</sup> and won a prize for best first film from the Egyptian Association of Film Writers and Critics, as well as second prize at the Bergamo Film Meeting. Nasrallah recalls: "Suddenly I tasted something I think is very precious . . . the freedom to make a film without any restrictions. No one told me I had to use a certain actor, or that the screenplay had to include this and not that. . . . From then on, that was the crucial thing I looked for when writing a film, when setting up the production: to what extent could I maintain the freedom that I experienced in my first film?"

#### MERCEDES

Nasrallah's next film, *Mercedes* (Mirsidis, 1993), follows Noubi, a communist from an upper-class family, who struggles to figure out how to live in an Egypt that seems to have completely rejected his ideals. In the 1970s, Noubi's mother has him confined to a mental hospital to cure him of communism. He is released with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and emerges to find his family consumed by greed, ostentation, and snobbery. His aunt seems to deal in drugs, smuggling them in the corpses of murdered children. Former leftists have sworn allegiance to capitalism and integrated themselves into Egypt's business elites and authoritarian regime. Migrant workers are leaving for Iraq and returning in coffins, but the media are preoccupied with the Egyptian soccer team's 1990 World Cup match against England, Egypt's former colonizer, portraying the Egyptian team's loss as a national disaster.

Rather than narrating a story that enables the audience to form and test hypotheses about what will happen, the film follows Noubi as he struggles to make sense of a series of disparate social realities, whose relations to one another remain ambiguous. He searches for his gay half-brother, Gamal, and finds him

in a cheap cinema, which an all-male audience uses as a space for carnivalesque social rebellion based on drug use, gang loyalties, and homosexual encounters (see Armbrust 1998a, 426; Armbrust 2001, 37–38). Allusions to the biblical story of the Flood abound. Downtown Cairo is in flames as the police battle Islamist militants. Finally, Noubi, his girlfriend, and Gamal escape to the wilderness at the edge of the desert, surrounded by animals, as if they have just disembarked from Noah's Ark, ready to rebuild humanity. Nasrallah explained:

I began writing it in 1989. The whole socialist bloc was collapsing. . . . Terrorism was starting to appear. Sadat had been assassinated. . . . Bombs were being thrown in Cairo, people were being shot in the street. . . . The atmosphere was like the end of the world. We started to hear about very strange crimes. . . . And you're someone who always dreamed of a just world and so on, and when you talk about that, people . . . tell you you're an idiot or crazy. . . . At the time, there were a lot of Mercedes cars. . . . Their owners would drive them in the most outrageous way, as if they owned the country.<sup>8</sup> . . . I wanted to tell a story about a socialist in a world where socialism is collapsing.

*Mercedes* was the first film Nasrallah made for Arte. The film received positive reviews in France and in Egypt, but did poorly at the box office, no doubt partly because it lacks a conventional storyline (al-Shinnawi 1993). The widespread rejection of leftist ideas, which inspired the film, probably also made audiences unlikely to be receptive to it. Many viewers must also have disapproved of the sympathetic portrayal of gay characters. When the film was shown at the National Festival for Egyptian Cinema in Cairo in 1994, some journalists attacked it "as perversity made for the sake of hostile foreigners," particularly because of its French funding, "which they took as an indication of a sinister cultural agenda" (Armbrust 2002, 926). In their view, Nasrallah had "sullied Egypt's national reputation by showing foreigners an unflattering view of Egyptian society" (Armbrust 1998b, 385). I have argued elsewhere (Geer 2009) that nationalism favors heteronomy among cultural producers; it is not surprising that nationalist concepts were used as symbolic weapons to attack a film for exposing social ills.

Nasrallah's reply to these accusations is that with funding from European public television, "you're free to make your film as you like. . . . It's not . . . like what people usually imagine, that the West is conspiring against us, imposing conditions on us." When Arab producers refused to finance *The Gate of the Sun* (2004), his film about the Palestinian cause (discussed below), and Arte financed



it instead, conspiracy theorists were confused. "Because they don't interact with the rest of the world. . . . People here have been cut off from the world for sixty years, not understanding how it works, and not wanting to understand."

Moreover, there are few other funding options: "Egyptian cinema is in an awful crisis." Its traditional market, the Arab world, has collapsed because of poverty, wars, protectionist measures, and competition with American and Indian films. The domestic market "can cover only a few comedies and so on, which I have nothing against." Censorship in Saudi Arabia is so strict that when *Mercedes* was distributed there, forty minutes of the film were cut, including everything to do with Christianity (a church, a wedding, a funeral), along with the dancing, the kisses, and the drugs. "So obviously, if you want to make the films you want to make, the way you want to make them, you have to find other markets. . . . I worked for a long time with Arte. . . . They want a film that's an hour and a half or two hours long, or four hours long, that they can put on television, and that's it. . . . Their only condition is that they like the screenplay."

Arguably, for Arte, "they like the screenplay" means that, in their view, it responds to the aesthetic standards of art cinema. This was the beginning of a long relationship with European television channels, with which all his subsequent films until *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story* (*Femmes du Caire / Ihki Ya Shahrazad*, 2009) were co-produced. One aspect of Nasrallah's cultural capital—his multilingualism—must have facilitated this; he obtained all his primary and secondary education in a German school in Cairo, learned impeccable French at home (Godard 1988), and is fluent in English.

#### ON BOYS, GIRLS, AND THE VEIL

The interest in working-class lives that is apparent in Nasrallah's first two films is developed into a sophisticated ethnography in his documentary, *On Boys, Girls, and the Veil* (*A propos des garçons, des filles et du voile / Subyan wa-Banat*, 1995). It explores the social world of actor Bassem Samra (who had a minor role in *Mercedes*), through his daily life at home with his family, his job as a teacher in a vocational school, his friendships, and his attempts to get acting jobs, focusing on the social norms that structure contacts between young men and women, and particularly on the significance of the *hijab*, or Islamic headscarf, which by then had become a standard part of the attire of most Egyptian Muslim women. As Walter Armbrust (1998b, 383–384) notes: "Nasrallah's goal



Leil and Yasser in *Summer Thefts*.

is to suggest that the matter of the *hijab* is not exclusively linked to religion. . . . People in the film talk about the *hijab* as a matter of modesty, a fashion statement, a phenomenon of peer pressure, and as a practical response to the modern imperative of female work in the public domain."

*On Boys, Girls, and the Veil* was another co-production with Arte, and it received very positive reviews in France. It was cleared by the Egyptian censors but never had a commercial release in Egyptian cinemas; the authorities apparently preferred to avoid controversy on a sensitive topic. Armbrust (1998b) explores the film in detail, but one additional aspect of it merits further consideration: the complex involvement of Bassem Samra, an actor playing himself in a documentary, whose role overlaps with that of the director. This collaboration between Samra and Nasrallah, which would reappear and develop in subsequent films, can be interpreted as a way of transcending the limitations of the way in which Nasrallah's first two films dealt with the working class, from the point of view of an outsider. As Nasrallah observed: "I filmed it with his real family. But . . . it's not really him. It's the image of himself that he wants to give you. . . . He plays two roles at once: he's there as a character, and at the same time he's introducing me to the others. In a sense he plays the role of the director."



During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, stunned Palestinian villagers look on as an Arab Liberation Army commander tells them that the situation is hopeless in *The Gate of the Sun*.



Hebba faces down her husband in *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story*.

### THE CITY

Nasrallah got the idea for *The City* (*La ville / Al-Madina*, 1999) from observing the destruction of parts of the working-class Cairo neighborhoods of Rod al-Farag and Bulaq, which are located on the opposite bank of the Nile from his apartment in the upscale area of Zamalek. Some of the inhabitants of these areas were moved to suburbs; their old neighborhoods, including the market of Rod al-Farag, were replaced with commercial and residential buildings for the wealthy. Nasrallah recalled that this had also happened to Les Halles, the old market in central Paris (starting in 1969). He therefore planned a film focusing on these two neighborhoods and their similar fates. Lacking familiarity with both places, he enlisted Nasir Abd al-Rahman, a scriptwriter from Rod al-Farag, and Claire Denis, a French director, to help him write the script (Farid 2000).

The film deviates from this plan in ways that make it less about working-class neighborhoods and more about the individual's liberation from oppressive social structures. Bassem Samra plays Ali, who works as an accountant in a butcher shop in Rod al-Farag and is determined to become an actor. His father, who is among the vendors moved out of the old market, disparages his ambitions and pressures him to join him in business in the new market. In a screen test, an Egyptian director berates him for fancying himself an actor, implicitly because he is from the wrong social class. Nasrallah observed that the same class prejudice was reflected in complaints about the film in Egypt, expressed once again in nationalist terms: "You could hear people say, Oh, my, couldn't you have filmed *The City* in Zamalek? Did you have to go to Rod al-Farag and make Egypt look ugly? . . . I don't find Rod al-Farag ugly, I find it beautiful. . . . The taboo is against seeing. . . . Anything that has to do with the world as it is, with what really happens, with what the country actually looks like . . . you're not supposed to talk about it. . . ."

Like Nasrallah, Ali escapes restrictive social ties by emigrating; he goes to Paris with an acting troupe. Two years later, he is an illegal immigrant, boxing in rigged matches. Claire Denis was then playing a major role in the mobilization of French filmmakers in support of undocumented immigrants (Ayad 1998). Instead of focusing on Les Halles, the middle section of the film explores the world of clandestine Arab workers in Paris. When Ali rebels against the organizers of the rigged boxing matches, they try to kill him, and he wakes up from a coma with amnesia. An Egyptian consular official accuses him of being a swindler and tarnishing Egypt's reputation. Ali returns to his family, but they

are strangers to him. Nasrallah explained: "Ali does what he wants to do, and comes back an actor. Losing his memory is the best thing that ever happened to him, because he can now separate people he can't stand from people he likes, without the baggage of saying, That's my father, that's my grandmother, and so on. He says, I like this person right now. He becomes a free human being."

Once again, Samra's role blurs the distinction between acting and living. He and his character share ambitions, a social background, and the obstacles that result. Ali tells the director that he wants to be an actor because, when he goes about his daily life, he does not really see anything, but when he pretends he is acting, he sees every detail, feels as if he is embracing the whole world, and stops feeling lonely.

Nasrallah's application for a grant from the Fonds Sud, a French state subsidy for the production of films from the global South, was rejected on the grounds that more than 25 per cent of *The City* takes place in France, and that this deprived the film of "cultural specificity" (Ayad 1998). Fortunately, Arte and the other European institutions that funded the film did not share this culturalist perspective, and Nasrallah managed to make the film for about EGP £2 million (about US \$600,000 in 1998 dollars). To reduce costs, it was shot in video and transferred to 35mm film. With that budget, Nasrallah could not have afforded an Egyptian star, whose salary would have been at least EGP £1 million (about US \$300,000); hence, once again, he worked with non-professional actors. This choice had other advantages; in his view, the habits that professional actors acquire from working on TV dramas make them less adaptable to his preferred approach of shooting the same scenes many times, in different ways (Farid 2000). The film won the Special Jury Prize at the 1999 Locarno Film Festival, Samra won the prize for best actor at the 2000 Carthage Film Festival, and the French press gave the film high praise on the whole. Egyptian critics described it as a great work of art, which honored Egypt in international festivals, and they lamented the fact that it was shown only in one cinema in Cairo, with little publicity.

#### THE GATE OF THE SUN

*The Gate of the Sun* (*La porte du soleil / Bab al-Shams*, 2004) is a two-part, four-and-a-half-hour film about the Palestinian predicament, based on Lebanese writer Elias Khoury's celebrated Arabic novel of the same title (Khoury 1998; English translation, Khoury 2006). Nasrallah wanted to make a film about

Palestine as a reply to the ostensibly pro-Palestinian discourses of Arab governments, aimed at silencing internal dissent rather than promoting solidarity with Palestinians.

I'm not Palestinian, but I've been paying for Palestine all my life. . . . For sixty years, I've been told, Shut up, don't open your mouth, and the only narrative that's been allowed on Palestine is the narrative of Nasser, Saddam Hussein, and Hafez al-Assad. . . . That's what gives the novel its legitimacy: taking a narrative that was monopolized by governments and bizarre organizations, and telling them, You don't understand anything. . . . You don't know how to talk about Palestine. I know how to talk about Palestine.

Khouri, who fought on the side of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the Lebanese civil war of 1975–1990, is a major literary figure in Lebanon (Hoffman 2006, 52–53; Douin 2004). The novel is based partly on stories he collected from Palestinian refugees. It deals with the lives of Palestinian peasants in the 1940s, the ethnic cleansing they experienced at the hands of Zionist militias in 1948 (see Pappe 2006), the resulting exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and the lives of Palestinian refugees and resistance fighters in Lebanon until the 1990s. This multitude of stories is encompassed within a frame story, as in the *Thousand and One Nights* (see Jarrar 2008, 308–310). The main narrator is Khalil, an orphan in his forties, who was born in a refugee camp in Beirut and fought as part of the PLO during the civil war. Working as a nurse in the hospital of the Shatila refugee camp, he looks after a dying, comatose patient: Yunes, a hero of the 1948 war and the Palestinian resistance, who has been like a father to him. From 1948 until 1968, Yunes went back and forth between Lebanon and Galilee, where his wife, Nahilah, raised their children in what was now Israel. Their secret meeting place was a cave called Bab al-Shams (the Gate of the Sun). Khalil's lover, Shams, a self-reliant woman who led a combat unit, has killed one of her other lovers and been killed in retaliation. Khalil has taken refuge in the hospital, fearing her family will blame him and take revenge. He sits by Yunes's bedside, telling him these stories and many others, to coax him back to consciousness.

The novel critiques the heroic, conventionally masculine nationalist discourse of Palestinian resistance fighters of Yunes's generation (see Kanafani 2008; Head 2011). In 1968, Nahilah tells Yunes that he understands nothing: while he has been living the life of a revolutionary, she has been struggling with mundane reality for twenty years, raising their children in poverty and living



on charity. She is tired of his stories about how some hero, such as Nasser, will liberate Palestine; she needs money to help their eldest son open a garage. She supports the struggle for Palestinians' rights, but believes that things can no longer be put back the way they were (Khoury 1998, 391–410).

Nasrallah wrote the script with Khoury and Lebanese director and film critic Mohamed Soueid. The film expresses the novel's main points by completely reworking its structure. While the novel proceeds by chains of associations between memories, skipping back and forth in time, the film uses fewer flashbacks, because, as Nasrallah said, film narrative cannot sustain such a large number of digressions. Lacking space for all the novel's events, the film focuses more on the central characters. Details are simplified and related stories are merged. But like the novel, the film makes room for contradictory versions of stories, told by different, unreliable narrators (see Caiani 2007, 141–142).

Through rearrangement of events into a more chronological sequence, the two parts of the film roughly correspond to two conceptions of history. The first part presents idyllic images of Palestine before 1948, followed by the horror of what Zionists did to it. Its lyrical style is comforting, as Nasrallah explained, "because you see yourself as a victim." The second part, which deals mainly with events from the 1950s onward and largely abandons this lyricism, is "basically about what we did to ourselves . . . what it's like to live in a refugee camp, in exile, what it's like to live through a civil war. That's an Arab reality." Thus the film escapes "the dualism of executioners and victims" (Frodon 2004). Nasrallah wanted Yunes in the film to look like the traditional Arab leaders of the 1950s and '60s, father figures whose stifling hegemony must be shaken off. A character says, referring to Khalil: "This man has too many fathers."

Nasrallah sought funding for the film from Egyptian and other Arab television channels, but they refused, seeing the topic as a thorny issue (Nasr 2005). Only one Arab production company, the Moroccan company 2M, supported the film (Frodon 2004). So once again, *The Gate of the Sun* was produced mainly by Arte, along with other European institutions.

Both French and Egyptian critics lavished praise on the film; *Cahiers du cinéma*, the canonical French art-cinema magazine, gave it a glowing review (Hansen-Løve 2004). In Egypt, however, only three copies were shown in cinemas, and there was very little publicity; an Egyptian critic described this as a great injustice (al-Shafii 2005). I will suggest a different interpretation of this distribution and marketing strategy below.

#### THE AQUARIUM

In *The Aquarium* (*L'aquarium / Junainat al-Asmak*, 2008), the two main characters are affluent professionals in their thirties who live in Zamalek. Laila (Hend Sabry) is the ambitious host of a late-night radio call-in show on which listeners reveal personal secrets.<sup>9</sup> Youssef is an anesthetist who enjoys listening to his sedated patients talk. Both are terrified of acknowledging their own feelings or indeed taking any risks.

The title refers to a public park in Zamalek; it contains an underground aquarium in an artificial cave, and is known as a meeting place for lovers. The fish in the tanks, like the characters, are trapped behind glass walls (Salim 2008), while the cave evokes an inner world of frightening desires (El-Shakry 2008). The film's slow visual rhythm often gives the impression that the camera is under water. Laila's sound engineer Zakki (Bassem Samra) is in love with her, but she remains in a safer arrangement, living with her mother and having a relationship with a wealthy and powerful older man, who requires no emotional involvement. Youssef is in a relationship with a divorcee, but cannot communicate with her. Egypt's social ills continually intrude on the lives of the protagonists, but they refuse to get involved. After Laila takes a call from an HIV-positive listener, a friend invites her to visit an HIV-AIDS support group, but she refuses. Youssef drives through a silent demonstration organized by Kefaya, a movement against one-party rule in Egypt (see El-Mahdi 2009) but appears completely indifferent.

*The Aquarium* adopts stylistic traits of avant-garde cinema, as Tartoussieh (2012) observes; it does this more than any of Nasrallah's other films that I have seen. Actors deliver monologues about their characters, speaking directly to the camera about things that the characters cannot say to one another; thus, like *The City*, the film presents acting as a way to get closer to reality. Sometimes the actors switch between the first and third persons when talking about their characters. In his monologue, Bassem Samra says "I" instead of "Zakki," corrects himself twice, and finally says bitterly, "Yes, I love Laila," without correcting himself. Moreover, he behaves like a film director: he asks an apparition of Hend Sabry to repeat one of her lines from an earlier scene, and corrects her delivery.

The French newspaper *Le Monde* gave the film a positive review. Egyptian reviews were mixed; some described it as great art, while others found it incomprehensible. Very few copies were shown in Egyptian cinemas. Nasrallah explained that the marketing and distribution strategy was intended to meet



the expectations of the audience that wants to see a “different” film (Nasr 2008). This suggests that limited distribution and publicity is a way of signaling that the film is meant for a restricted audience, which gains symbolic profits from this exclusivity.

#### SCHEHERAZADE TELL ME A STORY

*Scheherazade Tell Me a Story* (*Femmes du Caire / Ihki Ya Shahrazad*, 2009) is about women. Wahid Hamid, who had written the blockbuster film adaptation of Alaa al-Aswany's novel *The Yacoubian Building* (2006), wrote the script and proposed it to Nasrallah. The protagonist, Hebba (Mona Zaki, a major star), hosts a popular TV talk show that bravely challenges the government on political issues. Her husband, Karim, is an unprincipled deputy newspaper editor, who hopes to replace the current editor when the latter moves on. A high official tells Karim he has a shot at the promotion if he persuades his wife to avoid political issues on her show. Under pressure from Karim, she does three episodes about women's issues. First, an upper-class woman in a private mental hospital explains that she never married, and has remained a virgin, because she never found a man who saw her as anything but a sex object. Next is the story of three working-class sisters who became secretly engaged to their shop assistant, without telling one another; when they found out, one of them killed him. After seeing this episode, Karim accuses Hebba of tarnishing Egypt's reputation. Finally, a dentist tells how she was the victim of a rich, powerful man who married a series of wealthy women to extort money from them. He was then appointed as a minister in government, and she responded by staging a one-woman protest in front of Parliament, surrounded by riot police. Karim is passed over for the promotion, and beats Hebba, who then appears on her show covered in bruises, to tell her own story.

*Scheherazade* was an entirely Egyptian, commercial production, and it was Nasrallah's most successful film at the box office; it sold half a million tickets (Fabre 2010). Hence it is not surprising that it is largely a melodrama, like many of the most profitable Egyptian films. For the most part, the female characters are innocent victims of thoroughly repulsive men.<sup>10</sup> But they are not helpless victims; they resist intimidation, and in Nasrallah's view, telling their stories in public is a kind of rebellion (Abu al-Suud 2009). Like *Scheherazade* in the *Thousand and One Nights*, Hebba talks in order to not to be crushed. The film was also a way for Nasrallah to overcome his own fears about his ability to reach a wide audience.

The Egyptian press praised the social critique implicit in the story, despite reservations about the use of stereotypes. Reviews in France approved of the film's exploration of the political aspects of love, while lamenting the flatness of the characters, and characterized the film as a compromise between art cinema and soap opera. While the film is not as autonomous as Nasrallah's earlier films, it is clearly more autonomous than most mainstream cinema.

#### AFTER THE BATTLE

In the midst of the revolutionary uprising that began in Egypt on January 25, 2011, Nasrallah filmed *After the Battle* (*Après la bataille / Bad al-Mawqia*, 2012), which returns to the topic of the challenge to social norms represented by emotional bonds and solidarities that cross class boundaries. Blending fiction with documentary, it begins with an incident that took place on February 2 of that year: a group of horse and camel riders attacked anti-regime demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir Square, before being chased out by protesters. Like Rossellini's neorealist cinema, which Nasrallah had in mind, *After the Battle* deals with major historical events that were unfolding during the filming, through the exploration of the subjective experiences of fictional characters (Nasrallah et al. 2013). Reem (Minna Shalaby), an affluent woman, has a chance encounter with Mahmoud (Bassem Samra), a rider who participated in the attack on Tahrir Square. Like the heroine of Rossellini's *Europe '51*, she faces the incomprehension and hostility of her social circle as she becomes involved in the lives of poor people. In Nazlet el-Samman, a village near the Pyramids where Nasrallah had filmed *On Boys, Girls, and the Veil*, men like Mahmoud earned their living by selling rides to tourists, until the regime and the uprising undermined their business. Tricked into riding into Tahrir Square to defend the regime in exchange for empty promises, Mahmoud was publicly humiliated as videos on the Internet showed him taking a beating at the hands of protesters, and his children were bullied by their classmates at school.

Reem prods Mahmoud, his wife, and other inhabitants of Nazlet el-Samman into challenging certain kinds of domination—for example, by attempting to form a labor union for riders. Yet the villagers are not mere ignorant bumpkins in need of enlightenment: they push back against Reem's “paternalistic developmentalism,” an attitude that has tended to characterize the Cairo intelligentsia's perceptions of the rural poor in Egypt (Abu-Lughod 2005). The village's real inhabitants participated in writing the screenplay as the film was being shot, and this collaboration is mirrored in scenes suggesting that Reem can contribute to

the life of the village only through dialogue with its inhabitants, rather than by giving them a lecture. At the same time, she pushes back against the deep class prejudices of her upper-class revolutionary friends, who pay lip service to the idea of talking to ordinary people in the street, but in reality are terrified of the breakdown of class divisions.

Though actors Samra and Shalaby are major stars, Nasrallah returned to the strategy of co-production with French television; his insistence on working without a script written in advance, and shooting for as long as necessary, would no doubt have seemed risky to commercial film producers. The state-run newspaper *Al-Ahram* made much of the fact that one of the French producers is Jewish, accusing the film of being part of a Zionist conspiracy; a director named Ahmad Atif played a prominent role in this attack, whose main motivation could thus be professional rivalry. Still, *After the Battle* received very positive reviews in the Egyptian and French press and was shown at the Cannes film festival.

Nasrallah's social background and biography, combined with the emergence of new types of European public funding for cinema just as he was starting his career, have enabled him to maintain a relatively autonomous trajectory for thirty years, and to gradually achieve consecration as a filmmaker, with the support of critics in both Egypt and France. This slow process is in keeping with the long production cycle characteristic of autonomous cultural production, in which "the most innovative works tend, *with time*, to produce their own audience" (Bourdieu 1996, 253). It is this gradual consecration that made it possible for him to direct a film like *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story* and have it financed entirely by an Egyptian production company. Nasrallah's budgets are now much bigger than before, though still less than those of such Egyptian blockbusters as *The Yacoubian Building*. And in recent years, some of his films have appeared repeatedly on television in Egypt. As he put it: "In 1988, nobody wanted to work with me. Nobody knew who I was. . . . I started making films, and . . . actors realized that the actors who worked with me acted very well, and this made them want to work with me, too. . . . My films have started to create their own audience . . . my friends' children and their friends. . . . Another generation. . . . They're the ones who brought my generation to see my films."

#### NOTES

1. I would like to thank the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore, which generously funded this research.

2. For a fuller explanation of the concept of field, see Bourdieu (1996). For a discussion of the application of this theory to cinema, see Duval (2006) and Nakajima (2010).

3. The classical Hollywood style has "dominated the world's screens" since the 1920s, both in American films and in films made elsewhere (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1988, 619–626). Meanwhile, a variety of mass-market styles have emerged, some of which are conventionally associated with particular countries. Arguably, these styles share key characteristics with the classical Hollywood style, and these similarities distinguish all of them from art cinema. Like Higson (2000), I question the usefulness of the concept of "national cinema." I would argue that cinematic tastes have more to do with cultural capital than with geography.

4. Arte gets 95 percent of its budget from state funding, which is paid for by a tax on TV ownership. It is not allowed to show advertising, and it manages its budget autonomously.

5. Unless otherwise indicated, Nasrallah's biographical information and quotes are taken from a four-hour interview conducted by the author with the director in Arabic, at the director's home in Cairo, on May 7, 2012.

6. For an overview of this party, see Ismael and El-Sa'id (1990, 129–147). On the 1972 student protests, see Abdalla (1985, 176–211).

7. The film reviews consulted for this chapter were taken from the Egyptian periodicals *Akhir Saa*, *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Ahram al-Masai*, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, *Al-Akhbar*, *Al-Arabi*, *Al-Badil*, *Al-Dustur*, *Al-Jumhuriya*, *Al-Masa*, *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, *Al-Qahira*, *Al-Shuruq*, *Ruz al-Yusif*, and *Shashati*, and the French periodicals *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Le Monde*, and *Libération*, from 1988 to 2010.

8. "The expensive imported automobile (especially the Mercedes in later years) as symbol of decadence is . . . a familiar device in Egyptian cinema" (Armbrust 1995, 108).

9. The idea for Laila's program was inspired by a real Egyptian radio show, called "Itirafat Layliya" (Night Confessions), that was hosted by Buthayna Kamel. However, Laila's character is clearly not based on Kamel, a well-known political activist.

10. The exception is the story about the three sisters and the shop assistant, which intrigued Nasrallah because of its reversal of conventional roles: here, the man is dominated by women.

#### FILMOGRAPHY OF YOUSRY NASRALLAH

*Summer Thefts / Vols d'été / Sariqat Sayfiya*. 1988. Distributed by Misr International Films. 102 minutes.

*Mercedes / Mirsidis*. 1993. Distributed by Misr International Films. 105 minutes.

*One Day with Youssef Chahine / Une journée avec Youssef Chahine*. 1994. Distributed by Canal+. Short film.

*The Extra / Le figurant*. 1994. Distributed by Canal+. Short film.

- On Boys, Girls, and the Veil / A propos des garçons, des filles et du voile / Jugend, Liebe und Koran / Subyan wa-Banat.* 1995. Distributed in the United States by Arab Film Distribution. 72 minutes. Documentary.
- The City / La ville / Die Stadt / Al-Madina.* 1999. Distributed by Misr International Films. 108 minutes.
- The Gate of the Sun / La porte du soleil / Das Tor zur Sonne / Bab al-Shams.* 2004. Distributed by Misr International Films. 278 minutes.
- The Aquarium / L'aquarium / Das Aquarium / Junainat al-Asmak.* 2008. Distributed by Misr International Films. 90 minutes.
- Scheherazade Tell Me a Story / Femmes du Caire / Ihki Ya Shahrazad.* 2009. Distributed in the United States by ArtMattan Productions. 134 minutes.
- Interior/Exterior / Dakhili/Khariji.* 2011. Short film included in *18 Days / 18 Yawm*. Distributed by Eurozoom.
- After the Battle / Après la bataille / Nach der Revolution / Bad al-Mawqia.* 2012. Distributed by MK2 Diffusion. 116 minutes.

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